

News

ENVIRONMENTALISTS OPPOSE LEVEE PLAN

CONSERVATION GROUPS CHALLENGE FLOOD-PROTECTION POLICY WITH FEDERAL LAWSUIT FILED MONDAY

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All growing things except grass would be stripped from 1,600 miles of Central Valley levees under a federal flood-protection policy that environmentalists challenged in court Monday.

Three conservation groups filed a federal lawsuit against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, claiming that it failed to properly study the consequences if trees and shrubs are yanked from the levees bordering Valley waterways, including the San Joaquin and Calaveras rivers and Bear Creek.

That foliage provides what little habitat remains for a number of fish and animals, some of which are endangered. And it lends aesthetic value to rivers and streams.

"A lot of levees here are like an extension of the riverbank. If you get rid of those trees, you've got streams that look like drainage ditches instead of beautiful, tree-lined rivers," said Bob Wright, an attorney for the conservation group Friends of the River, one of the plaintiffs to the lawsuit.

Then there is the cost of the Army Corps' policy, estimated by the California Department of Water Resources to be \$7.5 billion, perhaps less if the federal government grants exemptions and allows some of the vegetation to remain.

The Corps declined to comment Monday because of the pending litigation.

Since the mid-1950s, the Corps has allowed brush and small trees on the water side of levees. State officials say no levee failures can be attributed to that growth.

Two years after Hurricane Katrina, however, the Corps began reviewing its standards, warning that the roots of toppling trees could tear away portions of levees and that heavy brush makes it more difficult to inspect those levees for defects.

Critics of the Corps argue trees actually stabilize levees. That debate continues.

San Joaquin County has come down against the scorched-earth policy, warning in comments last year that such a large investment of money to uproot trees would do little to improve the levees and would leave more important flood-control issues - like seepage or erosion - unaddressed.

It also would force agencies that maintain the levees to violate endangered species protections, the county argued, basically breaking one rule to comply with another.

Perhaps most importantly, failure to remove the trees and brush could prompt the Corps to withhold money that communities would need to rebuild a levee after a flood.

While the Corps has said it would begin enforcing the vegetation standard in 2012, the environmental groups say about 3,000 trees have already been removed in the Natomas area of Sacramento.

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